

## 13 Investigates

### Indiana's new smoke alarm policy affects millions of Hoosiers

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[Bob Segall](#)/13 Investigates

Indianapolis - For years, Indiana's fire marshal has been preaching, "Smoke alarms save lives." Now he has a different message.

"We've only been telling half the story," said Fire Marshal Roger Johnson. "Smoke alarms do save lives, but the kind of smoke alarm you have is critically important. We can be saving more Hoosiers if we get people to understand a new message: not all smoke alarms are the same."

Thursday morning at Fire Station No. 82 on Indianapolis' west side, the fire marshal announced [Indiana's new position on smoke alarms](#).

The state's official position advocates that all Indiana homes be equipped with photoelectric or dual sensor smoke alarms which, according to the fire marshal, provide better overall protection than the more popular ionization smoke alarm.

Ionization smoke alarms are currently found in an estimated 93% of U.S. homes and cost between \$5 and \$10. Photoelectric smoke alarms cost between \$10 and \$15, while dual sensor alarms (containing both ionization and photoelectric technology) cost usually cost between \$18 and \$30 each.

But Johnson said the higher cost is well worth the investment because of the added protection offered by photoelectric technology.

"The fact is, it's your life we're talking about here," Johnson said. "If you go to sleep at night with just an ionization smoke alarm, you're playing a game of Russian roulette, betting that that smoke alarm is going to operate. We've seen ionization smoke alarms not work in slow, smoky fires and that scares me."

Johnson is referring to [multiple tests conducted earlier this year](#) by WTHR and Indiana fire departments. The tests showed that photoelectric smoke detectors usually sounded long before ionization detectors during slow-burning, smoldering fires. In some of the tests, the ionization smoke detectors did not sound at all, even when they were surrounded by thick, toxic smoke.

"The ionization smoke detectors did not perform at an acceptable level to us in a slow, smoldering fire," said Troy Weimer, a Wayne Township firefighter who conducted some of the tests.

Following the tests, many fire departments around the state have stopped ordering ionization smoke alarms for their communities, choosing to purchase dual sensor and photoelectric smoke alarms instead.



Roger Johnson, state fire marshal



Dual sensor smoke alarms

The Brownsburg Fire Department recently used a Homeland Security grant to purchase 2,000 dual sensor smoke alarms.

"We feel this is a much better option and offers better protection for our community," said Brownsburg Fire Lt. Ryan Miller. "We won't get ionization smoke detectors any more."

Brownsburg firefighters spent several hours Thursday afternoon installing the dual sensor smoke alarms for residents who need them.

"I do appreciate it," said Dallas Halcomb, a longtime Brownsburg resident whose ionization smoke alarms were more than ten years old. "I don't know too much about the different kinds of smoke alarms but I know these are the good ones."

The state fire marshal says most Hoosiers and many Indiana firefighters also lack important knowledge about the difference in smoke alarms.

"This is the most important issue I've faced in the 44 years I've been in the fire service," Johnson said. "We are trying to get the message out that people's lives are in the balance here."

Flanked by top fire officials from around central Indiana, Johnson said that Hoosiers must understand "the difference between the two types of smoke detectors out there is phenomenal."

Johnson said he will spend the next two weeks traveling around Indiana to educate firefighters and communities about the state's new position on smoke alarms. He said he plans to extend the message to surrounding states later in the fall.

"This is just the beginning," Johnson said. "It's a good start but we have a lot of work to do."

Following WTHR's "[Deadly Delay](#)" investigation, the fire marshal created a smoke detector task force consisting of dozens of fire officials from around the state. That task force developed Indiana's newly-announced position on smoke alarms and is also considering proposed changes to the state's building codes that would require smoke alarms with photoelectric technology in newly-constructed homes and apartment buildings.

### **Get a dual sensor smoke detector**

Channel 13 and the Indiana Department of Homeland Security have more detailed information on what you should look for when you select a smoke detector. Learn how you can [get a dual sensor smoke alarm](#) with both photoelectric and ionization technology at a big discount.

### **What kind of smoke detector do you have?**

Photoelectric smoke detectors usually have the word PHOTOELECTRIC right on them. You might see a [big "P" or a "blue symbol"](#). And if you see the words "dual sensor," that means the smoke detector has both photoelectric and ionization built in.

If you don't see any symbols chances are, it's probably an ionization smoke detector. Those alarms are sometimes marked with a [letter I, or other symbols](#).

When you are taking a look at your smoke detector, please make sure to check the battery. That's crucial.

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## Your smoke detector might fail you

Most-installed device may not warn of smoldering fires, tests reveal

By Josh Duke

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Smoke detectors found in most Indiana homes don't fully protect residents from smoldering fires, fire officials said Thursday.

Led by State Fire Marshal Roger Johnson, the officials called on Hoosiers to install new or additional smoke detectors that sniff out a wider range of fires.

"If we don't get this message out of what we uncovered, people are going to die," Johnson said.

Smoke detectors have been in use for decades to prevent death and injury due to fire and smoke inhalation.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, however, 65 percent of home fire deaths from 2000 to 2004 resulted when smoke alarms weren't installed or weren't working.

Johnson's concern stems from tests conducted in June by the Brownsburg, Indianapolis, Speedway and Wayne Township fire departments.

Those tests showed that ionization detectors -- the type used in 93 percent of homes across the U.S. -- failed to detect smoldering fires.

Ionization detectors work best in recognizing open-flame fires.

Smoldering fires, like those caused by an unattended cigarette, could burn for hours without creating an open flame but still produce life-threatening smoke.

"Most smoldering fires occur when people are most vulnerable, when they are sleeping," Johnson said. "I'm not trying to scare the community, but if you go to bed with just an ionization detector, you are playing a game of Russian roulette."

Johnson said it's unclear whether any Hoosiers have died because an ionization detector failed to go off, but he wants to study that in future fire investigations.

Fire officials now recommend dual-sensor detectors that combine ionization with photoelectric technology, which is better at detecting smoldering fires.

Another alternative is using ionization and photoelectric detectors side by side.

Johnson blames the fire detector industry for failing to educate the public about the difference in detectors.

"Every smoke detector company on their packages say there is a difference, but they haven't widely reported that because they are selling detectors at \$6 apiece, and they don't want to upset the gravy train," Johnson said.

John Andres, director of engineering and quality for North Carolina-based smoke detector manufacturer Kidde, said tests have not conclusively shown ionization detectors are deficient on smoldering fires.

"It is important we are aware of all the data," he said. "But according to the data I've seen, there is no significant difference between the detectors."

Local fire officials say homeowners should not throw out their ionization detectors.

"We just feel homes should have the photoelectric or combination detectors, too," said Wayne Township Fire Capt. Troy Wymer.